

the days of our delights are poison in my veins by Ghostigos

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Summary:

Mike Wheeler is acting strange. Eleven notices.

the days of our delights are poison in my veins

Author's Note:

- For [10pintsofsacrifice](#).

This is dedicated to the ever-lovely [mayfieldmayhem](#), who makes legit the best Stranger Things fics I've ever read, go and check them out!!!! You won't regret it!!

(edit: this was written before s2, so some facts and plots set up during that season are not established here)

Being Mike's girlfriend is a weird title. One problem being that you've never exactly been educated on romance or any other feelings outside of obedience, fear, and anger. To have neither swirling in your stomach ("butterflies in your tummy", Nancy informs you) and making your cheeks flush a darker color is outside of your comfort zone.

You like when things make sense; when things click, they're easier to understand and analyze. You can pinpoint potential threats or benefits from identifying situations, and building those types of familiar environments from the ground up, no matter how unhealthy, makes the constant burdens you're forced upon your shoulders a little easier to carry.

But Mike was different. He always was, since he first found you. He was conscious of your potential triggers, he kept you warm and fed, and sure, he got mad sometimes...but you like to think that his anger towards you was justifiable. As it tends to be.

A year passes after he kissed you, and you disappeared, and you came back. It was weirder for a while; Mike always seemed to perform this funny dance around you (metaphorically, of course), like you were a set mouse trap ready to burst. He ventured between the two extremes of coddling you and avoiding you, which you didn't take kindly to.

Nancy later informed you that he's just awkward around "crushes", and when you pressed further it turned out that Mike hadn't forgotten about the kiss either.

So eventually, one thing leads to another, and the next thing you know you two are a "thing". You're not sure exactly what a "thing" is, but through snippets of Dustin and Lucas's teasing you can decipher that a boyfriend is your friend, but...*more*. Someone intimate and caring. And it's like walking along hot coals at first, for both of you and for different reasons. But you get the swing of it, eventually. He holds your hand and says you're pretty, and he makes you feel pleasant but not in the way that Dustin or Lucas or Joyce or even Papa (at one point in time) could. It's...nice. Unknown, maybe a bit scary, but nice.

It changed when you noticed a difference in Mike's behavior towards you.

Now, the thing is, you don't know Will Byers all that well. You like to think you saved him, but that's about it. And there wasn't much to tell, other than that he was dying and he needed help.

Since he's come back, he's mended this hollowness between the other boys that you yourself were never able to identify when you'd befriended them. Will is back and he makes the other boys happy. They joke and talk and hang out together and you suppose that was just how things were before you'd met them. Before everything went wrong.

After you'd managed to scoot yourself, albeit awkwardly, into their little group (you were Mike's girlfriend after all, Dustin declared, and they guessed that they could make an exception; Mike later soothed your worries by saying that Dustin was joking and you're always welcome), something changed.

It wasn't something *that* prominent, but you're always a bit too focused on stability within things around you to not notice. It was concerning how much Will Byers liked looking at your boyfriend.

You were all sitting around in Mike's basement (your old room) after a game of cards that you just watched them play, since you're not

fond of games yourself. They were talking and munching on some of Dustin's snacks, making bad jokes that you didn't feel like contributing in. So you just sat on the couch beside Mike, holding hands; that was enough for you.

And that's when you caught eyes with Will Byers from across the coffee table.

It was an accident, you could tell; his eyes were a bit too wide when they locked with yours. But you stared evenly back, unreliable in distributing emotions properly on your expression. Though it seemed to hurt him all the same.

As Will Byers analyzed your stare, and vice versa, he gave the impression of a startled animal; a deer in headlights, you think. Your gaze bored into his own with no remorse, which was an appearance you hadn't meant to sharpen but the way he's looking at Mike made you feel stiff and cold.

He glanced away, and you ignored the eyes of Mike Wheeler peeking over at the shied figure of the boy. He looked...

You weren't sure.

Eventually the fun and games subsided into breaking out sleeping bags, and you resorted to huddling close to where your fortress used to lie, entirely out of instinct. There's nothing there anymore, since all of your gatherings have been collected in a guest room at the Byers' household (they say it's all yours, but it doesn't feel like it). But the boys helped to arrange the corner with soft fabrics that you enjoy stroking your fingers across idly, and they whispered goodnights in your direction before you cuddled into your cocoon of blankets.

You heard chuckling and excited murmurs that rippled through the room, even when the lights were off, and you found the noises distracting. But not as distracting as when you looked up at the dimmed figures, huddling close to a nightlight, and you see the illuminated rosy cheeks of Will Byers staring at Mike Wheeler like he placed all the stars in the sky.

(Which he *didn't*.)

A month passes with no further inquiries on Mike's behalf concerning why you keep a sharper observation on Will Byers. If he falters when you hold his hand tighter around the other boys, neither of you refer to it.

That doesn't stop the incidents from occurring, though.

When you all order ice cream one summer afternoon (Dustin's treat, he boasts, since he'd received something called an 'allowance' earlier that day and you don't know what it is but you're just happy you're not buying), Will does that weird doe-eyed stare in Mike's direction.

You haven't noticed the dripping strawberry ice cream that stickies your fingers, nor the crunching of the waffle cone in your palm. You squeeze Mike's hand hard enough for it to hurt; your fingernails dig red crescents into his flesh.

This catches his attention, and despite the glassy layer of pain fresh on his face, he doesn't seem mad. He asks softly, "El? What's wrong?"

His fixation on you has now lead Will away to go and join Dustin and Lucas, chatting together like enthusiastic birds. You ignore the slump in Byers's shoulders.

You watch Will go as you say, "Nothing."

Not even a week after watching Will Byers eye your boyfriend do you realize that Mike is reciprocating the action.

At first you feel a pinch of something sour in your chest, but it's erased when you attempt to reason that maybe mirroring the actions of others is common courtesy, and maybe it could be labeled as endearing. Of course, if that were the case, you wouldn't know personally; you're still learning that crying in front of people is okay, that laughing at nothing in particular and humming a tune at random isn't an oddity. Interaction is about as easy as displaying sentiment

(which is to say: it's difficult).

But as you observe the differences in Lucas and Dustin's interactions versus Mike and Will's, you begin to see some faults.

Firstly: They dodge eye contact, which wouldn't be weird if they didn't have a weird flicker in their pupils when they did it, or a sly smile that teased at the corners, emanating a mischievous air amid the actions. When *you* avoid eye contact, you only feel a hollow absence of comprehension in your gut.

Second: They talk too much.

You compare Mike with Dustin first: laughs, jokes, weird card games and action figures that they seem to take pleasure in (although they're beginning to scoff that 'Toys are for babies', and you disagree but you say nothing about it). They're not tense around the other, and smiles come about as easily as breathing air into lungs. They fluctuate, they're carefree, and they're *happy*.

With Lucas: there's a bit more conflict that may edge a conversation, or a topic they seem to be touchy about—Lucas seems to be more shrewd about the way people of his skin type are treated (which is another thing you don't grasp), and Mike seems to be ignorant of that category. But overall, there's a backbone to the friendship that keeps it from crumbling, and there's also respect.

Neither of them make Mike blush, though. Only *you* can do that.

(And Will, apparently).

You're at the Byers' home, watching something or other on the television. Joyce sits with you, stitching something pretty with cotton fibers that you twist along your fingers, and she smiles and allows you to do so without a word.

Will Byers and Mike arrive at the same time, and the door opens so quick that your heartbeat flips but you steady yourself with Joyce gently squeezing your hand.

"Hey, boys," she greets them (her smile is tight with relief and you know that she worries more than she lets on), "Snacks are in the fridge if you want some."

"Thanks Mrs. Byers!" Mike grins, and he brightens when he spots you. "Oh, hey El! Will and I were just out making a swing set."

Your hands grow clammy; you wriggle them out of Joyce's grasp as you stare at the colorful threads in your lap.

There's an identical smile in Will's voice when he adds on, "Yeah, out near the camp! We haven't gotten it to stay up though." Then he laughs a little. "Mike fell on the ground like five times."

You hear a slap on the arm when Mike protests, "Shut up! I did not!"

"You did so! You were too fat for the branches!"

"Not true!"

"So true!"

"Boys!" Joyce interrupts, but there's no warning in her tone that makes you concerned (if that's even the correct word for it; you're not sure *how* you feel, and it's scary. It doesn't feel good, whatever it is).

Both continue to laugh on as they saunter into the kitchen, running and punching each other and having a tilt in their wording that you don't recognize until later.

Nancy called that sort of thing 'flirting'.

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You don't feel like holding Mike's hand anymore.

It's probably something about the weather that's dampening your mood, you decide. But when he extends a hand out of a mechanical need, you decline wordlessly.

The problem is he doesn't act like you want him to, however that

would be...maybe you want him to feel bad? Maybe even *sorry*?

Sorry for what?

The question arises when you spot Will Byers and Mike outside again, alone. You're on the Byers' porch, drinking lemonade. Jonathan is out back, mowing the lawn. The boys are in your view meanwhile, making what appears to be a garden.

They didn't ask you to join. So you don't.

They talk and talk and laugh a little, and then they're silent. Their faces are dark with blush and you're beginning to grow suspicious that maybe it's not just the summer heat that's boiling their cheeks a beet-red hue.

You sip idly at the lemonade, trying to find the birds overhead a charming tune to divert your attention, because if there's one thing you know, it's that friends don't spy on other friends.

It's just a fact.

But nothing works, not even trying one of Mike's games of forming shapes from clouds. There are no images of interest in the sky; the birds are singing offkey anyway.

You look back at the boys—out of *boredom*—and that *exact* moment do their hands touch.

Something in your ribs grows ice-cold. Your swallow is clogged in the back of your throat.

An accident?

Will Byers seems to be the most surprised at the predicament, his eyes the size of Mrs. Wheeler's dinner plates, and he fumbles away from Mike's grasp like it's a hot surface. He blubbers to Mike something you don't hear—and maybe something you don't particularly *want* to hear.

You catch fragments of: "I didn't mean" and "Sorry" and "Your girlfriend is" and "didn't want to". Melding the pieces together only

makes your skin crawl.

And then Mike Wheeler reaches out again.

And he takes Will Byers' hand.

And he squeezes it.

And you think he says, "No, it's okay."

You leave your lemonade to the hungry mosquitos and walk to the guest bedroom, where you slam the door.

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"Hey El, up for player two?"

Dustin tosses you a black box, and he opens it to show you a grid map with plastic boats.

Battleship, he explains. He tells you the rules and you nod, eagerly anticipating a new thing to learn about. Even if you don't enjoy games (too many weird rules), Dustin always makes it fun.

"Rule number one is that you can't use any of your crazy-shit mind powers," Dustin begins, with a rather pointed wag of his finger. You nod again, slightly amused.

The rest of the rules seem to be simple. Find the enemy's coordinates, strike before they figure out where your own ships lie.

You're enjoying the game thus far, despite the only reason you're hanging out with Dustin alone is because Lucas is sick, and Mike and Will Byers are 'busy'.

(Suspicious.)

But Dustin is the nicest, you think. He was the second to include you in the group after Mike, and the ever-present layers of apprehension you constantly wear peel away when he's around cracking jokes.

He sinks one of your smaller boats eventually, and during this attack

he asks you, “So, is anything going on between you and Mike lately?”

You perk up.

He continues awkwardly, “I mean...I don’t know, you both have been kinda...downers? More so than usual, I mean. Just wanted to see if something was up, I guess.”

Your tongue is lead when you shake your head and answer, “No.”

But it’s a lie. You don’t know *what* is ‘up’ with your relationship status lately, especially since Mike spends a lot of time with Will Byers and it’s made you feel uncomfortable.

You try and chalk up his attention to the boy as a sign of attachment from trauma, which Will Byers has yet to relieve himself of. You know that the nights are commonly the hardest in the Byers’s household, and sometimes the pills you both are given at dinner don’t always perform to the best of abilities upon shunning nightmares.

Maybe Mike feels bad because he feels like he’s not giving Will Byers enough company.

That’s probably it, right?

—Dustin just looks back down at his board, concealed by your own. You realize you haven’t given him a fair reasoning for your odd behavior.

“He likes Will,” you say, and the sentence is thick like molasses in your mouth.

Dustin just nods in agreement, and some weight is elevated from your shoulders upon exchanging an observation with someone else who’s noticed.

“Yeah, those two have been getting pretty close, haven’t they?” he eventually comments, and you nod as well. A stray battleship from the playset is squeezed into your palm. “Lucas and I haven’t really wanted to say anything... and I don’t think Mike really knows this, but...”

Dustin leans in suddenly, ignoring the boundaries set by your black panel grids, and you return the gesture out of rehearsal. A secret is about to be told.

“D’you know that Will is...well, he’s a queer?”

You furrow your brows, unresponsive. *What does that mean?* Is it bad?

Dustin looks around again like someone will pop out, and then continues, “Yeah, Lucas and I kinda figured it out already. He had this obvious crush on a guy in our class and—”

A guy?

But Will’s a boy too. And boys are supposed to like girls, right?

There’s a snicker from Dustin like Will Byers’s attraction to the anonymous boy in class is a warmhearted joke. “Yeah, the guy had it *really* fucking bad. But the kid moved away, so that was the end of that.”

The question rolls along your chest, then your throat, and then: “Will liked a boy?”

Dustin nods. “Yeah. And *man*, did he.”

He then retracts from your intimate position and snatches a handful of popcorn, residing in the big bowl next to you both.

You stare at him agape. *Does this not affect him?*

“Will would always tell these horror stories about his dad calling him some pretty nasty things,” Dustin explains through his mouthful of popcorn. “And I mean, I can see why he keeps quiet about it. If I liked guys too, I would feel pretty shitty all the time. Just imagine the reactions.”

He swallows his fill, unlike yourself as you simmer with more questions than answers.

“My point is that Will is different,” Dustin shrugs, careless, “and hey, none of us really care. I mean, you can move things with your *mind*,

for Christ's sake! And we don't exclude you for that, do we?"

You shake your head no.

"All this to say, who knows?" he concludes, crouching back down on his stomach to commence the board game again. "Maybe Will likes your boyfriend."

Something in you freezes, like a watch just broke into shards on your heart. Like being splashed in the face with cold water.

Dustin sinks another one of your ships. You could care less.

'Maybe Will likes your boyfriend'...

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Nowhere in the books you read or the shows you watch depict a same-gender couple.

You're starting to think that Dustin was just messing with you. It wouldn't be anatomically correct, would it? Are genders like equations, in which two negatives don't make a positive?

Or is it that two positives make a negative?

...Whatever the case, you're unsettled. You'd like to say that you feel like your world has been turned upside down if you didn't dislike the analogy for obvious reasons.

If Will likes guys—and if guys *can* like other guys—then that would surely make a bit more sense.

You try to insert Will into the place of a flirting couple onscreen. With the flushed faces, the cheeky smiles, and the discomfort that practically sears from the TV's screen.

And couples hold hands; you and Mike both hold hands, and you're boyfriend and girlfriend, right?

...So, would Will be labelled as the 'girlfriend', if he dated a guy?

No, no. That wouldn't be right.

Would it?

You're lost. It's all a new concept, and your embitterment might be veiling your empathy towards Will Byers (if there was any to distribute in the first place).

So what if Will Byers likes boys? And so what if he held hands with your boyfriend Mike Wheeler?

It doesn't mean anything...

...Does it?

You remember Nancy talking about another emotion in romance; a twist in your stomach and a shadow in your brain; the acid in your brain is like teasing a loose tooth, ready to pop out at any moment.

She called this one '*Jealousy*'.

The term 'Jealous' doesn't fit you snug at first, but it does take a few more dangerous run-ins with your boyfriend to eventually conclude that the word works and applying it to the situation.

Dustin said that Mike didn't know about Will liking boys; but that doesn't equate. If it seems to be that a lot of people seem avoidant of boys like Will Byers, then wouldn't he appear more disgusted at the flirtation? Would he be a bit more wary of his friend's subtle advances?

You're at lunch, eating with Lucas and Dustin and Will Byers because Mike hasn't taken you on a date alone in a long time. You order cheeseburgers and fries with a whiff of nostalgia at the taste, and the milkshakes eventually arrive and make all the boys seem a bit giddier.

Will Byers is seated beside your boyfriend (because of *course* he is) and they're laughing without your assistance. Mike only brushes against your own hand once or twice, but his eyes are all on Will Byers. *The queer.*

(The term feels wrong, but you don't know what else to call him).

Then there's a poke in your side, and Dustin is sitting closer than normal to you, wearing a toothy smirk. He side-glances back to Will Byers and Mike Wheeler 'flirting'.

He whispers to you smugly, "Told you so."

And then Lucas shoots a straw at him and he whips away from you, leaving you to a burger that you don't feel like eating anymore.

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You wish you weren't staying up late at night thinking about boys, like Mike teases Nancy for doing. But here you are, staring straight up at the popcorn-textured ceiling above you, drowning in a cyclone of thoughts.

The images of Mike and Will Byers flash through your mind like torture devices, even though you think this is stupid. This is *all stupid*.

You blink away tears; being 'in love' isn't supposed to be as painful as everything else. Isn't romance a getaway trip from the harsh realities of life and sharing troubles with somebody?

Were your troubles too much for Mike Wheeler? Did he bail on you for a queer? And are queers even *bad*?

The thoughts keep you thrashing under the covers until it becomes too hot, and you decide that a trip to the restroom to splash water onto your face is called for.

The floorboards creak under your weight, but your footsteps are delicate and petty after years of experience. The lead heft of your emotions seems to bog you down mercilessly, though, and even your movements are choppy with distraction.

There's shuffling emitting from Will Byers' room as you're walking down the thin hallway, and you stop because you know that he's probably up too (not for the same reasons as you, though. Probably).

You peek in despite yourself, because you know you're supposed to

be ‘jealous’ of Will Byers but you’ve seen him hunched in the Upside Down’s Castle Byers, clinging to life like tattered rags on skin. He was at his most vulnerable there; you both were. There’s a foreign sense of commitment you commonly feel towards him, regardless off him hitting on your boyfriend.

Will Byers is tucked neatly into bed, sitting upright, yet staring at nothing. You recognize the signs of a relapse when you see one, and there’s a drop of sympathy you contract from the sight.

Still, though. You need answers.

You knock on the door, and when he jumps out of his skin you try not to be too humbled with pity.

He sees you pop your head in, and his face becomes odd and twisted. Fearful, almost; and in that moment, you swear that your raging envy is virtually painted all over your skin, even if you can’t see it yourself.

“Will,” you say, remaining as neutral as possible.

He stares at you with darkened sockets bagging his eyes, and he looks really, really tired.

You need answers.

“Do you like Mike.”

You think you can hear his own heartbeat when you ask, and his eyes grow wide because you feel like you’ve addressed something that must not be named.

His horror at the question burrows a seed of doubt: What if you’re wrong? What if you’re delusional?

You don’t let this skepticism show on your face. And this does you well because Will Byers breaks away from your gaze with a sigh of defeat. He runs a hand through the hair that’s been matted from the bed.

“Eleven,” he murmurs, and you blink at the loss of your nickname.

“I...I don’t want to talk about this right now.”

He sounds guilty.

“Will,” you say again.

The dark makes it hard to depict the composite of emotion on his face, but never once does he look in your direction.

“Don’t worry, El,” he sighs again, and then retreats hastily back under the covers. His breath looks suddenly tattered under the blanket he’s stuffed under, and you notice how he seems to have purposely flipped over so that he’s not looking at you. “Don’t worry about it, okay? Just...I’m sorry. Go back to bed.”

You hear the closure implied in his tone, and you withdraw because you know that twisting knives into open wounds is the last method of interrogation you wish to achieve, especially if someone is vulnerable.

You’re not *that* heartless.

But you wash your face, you avoid looking at mirrors, and gracefully you crawl back into bed to once again resume your staring contest with the ceiling.

He didn’t answer your question.

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(...He *did* answer your question. You just don’t want to accept it.)

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A dark cloud hovers over your head when Mike waltzes downstairs, and he seems more shocked than happy to find you sitting patiently on his basement’s couch. He seems to have forgotten that you gave him a spare key to the house for emergencies (and you’re also rather sneaky, you’ve been told, but that’s not important).

“Oh,” he says, and then rubs at his neck. “Hey, El...”

That's it?

You just whisper, “Mike.” And your voice does carry the softness it usually distributes upon saying his name.

His face grows pale and you know that you’re both aware of the cracks forming in the relationship. Something needs to be addressed.

Mike shuffles in place, finding a particular spot on the carpet to be an object of interest. “I...I know I’ve been really weird lately.” He tries to form an empty laugh on a situation that doesn’t call for humor; your heart hardens. “I guess I’ve been really stressed out, y’know?”

About what.

You don’t know why you haven’t asked, but the questions tastes empty in your mind. You *know* the reason why he’s stressed.

Because Mike Wheeler keeps flirting with Will Byers behind your back.

And you’re angry about it.

“Mike,” you repeat, and you remember the night that you found Will Byers in his room, alone, ignoring and yet responding appropriately to the question at hand. They both batted your question away like a plaything, and you will *not* have it. Not anymore.

You feel your expression scowl and your teeth grit together. “You like Will.”

Mike jolts upright, looking at you square in the eyes and you drink in the horror plastered on his features.

“N-no!” he exclaims, but his voice is too high-pitched and you’re too clouded and blind to any form of common sense, and you bury your glare further and further into his corneas until you feel a twist in your skull.

He’s perturbed now, explicitly changing colors like a chameleon and his breath is short and he keeps looing away as he blusters, “I—I don’t like him! I don’t! I like *you*, El!”

His sugar-sweet words are sour in your brain, and your nose tickles because you think you're staring harder than needed be and you refuse to open the doors of your power for something harmful.

But you *want* to harm Mike, because he's *lying*.

"You like Will," you say again, and then louder: "You *like him! Don't you!*"

Not commonly are you one for speaking, so when you audibly rebel against Mike's assurance, he visibly pauses with astonishment.

Hazy-minded with rage, you instinctively brush your nose to check for droplets of red, but thankfully there are none.

"I saw you," you snap. "You held his hand! You *flirted* with him!"

"I—I didn't! That's *gross!*"

Dustin had implied that queers are unacceptable. Which explains Mike's grimace at the thought, but his actions seem...rehearsed. Empty.

Like a liar.

"Friends don't lie," you recite coldly.

Your words are thrown into the argument like a brick in the face, and Mike looks immediately more defensive than before, perhaps in a dangerous way. His eyes narrow and you watch the former glisten of his reproachful manner against your storm dissipate.

"What do you know?" Mike yells, and you step away out of nature, heart skipping. "You don't know what Will and I had before! What we—I mean, we're *friends*, Eleven! And I don't like guys! I like *you*, okay?"

You shake your head despite your inward shrinking at his personal fury. "No."

"No?! What do you want me to do? I can't like boys *and* girls!"

When was *that* brought up?

You look up with unbridled shock, because it sounds more that Mike is trying to reason with himself more than anybody else in the room. The house grows silent, chewing on this.

Your mouth slits open, and you haven't realized your lips are quivering when you whisper, "Mike..."

Mike Wheeler appears to have realized the mishap in his argument, and his eyes are lowered with what seems to be either fear or anger, or both. His posture is unwelcoming.

"Forget it, El," he grumbles, spitting out your name like it's a curse, and the backs of your eyes prickle.

You blink, your vision misting. "Mike—"

"*Forget it!*" he yells again, and your ears are cupped by your own hands within a millisecond because he's too loud too angry...

Then Mike whips around and stomps away, with an aura of pure upset. The room feels overturned now, and you're an intruder in a house you feel like was never meant to be a home to you.

He slams the door behind him and you leave.

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You and Mike are on ugly terms now, and it sits as well as it sounds.

Joyce holds you when you cry about it because she is ignorant to what you're truly hurt about, dismissing your muted sorrows as another bout of nightmares. She doesn't know that you are angry with her son for tattering something sacred and happy to you; he snatched Mike Wheeler away and you were helpless.

Is it because you don't know the depths of their friendship? Was it all a cruel misunderstanding?

You doubt that, but you wish it were the case.

And through your abysmal distraught, you make a decisive effort to give Will Byers the cold shoulder, eschewed of his trauma-induced dilemmas that place him in the same boat as you, which used to tie you together when nothing else would.

Didn't you ever *enjoy* Will Byers's company?

What is wrong with you? Why are you so mean?

He's a smart boy. He is brave and resourceful and a survivor. He was one of the first to vouch for you to stay with his family when you had nowhere to turn, and he used to rub your back and practice breathing exercises on the first several months you were back; at two in the morning, he would hold you and cry right alongside you.

So what happened?

Your keen efforts of ignoring Will Byers are all in vain, because the more you try to avoid him, the more you realize that he's miserably doing the exact same thing to *you*.

The day Lucas suggests heading out for ice cream again—because apparently there are some new flavors and they just *have* to be tasted—the full weight of your fight with Mike sinks in.

Your boyfriend (however loosely the title is applied now) sticks close to Dustin's side, and his jokes are as hollow as his grin. If Dustin notices the alteration in Mike's demeanor, he has a good sense to not call him out on it during a supposedly 'good' day.

You beg to differ though; the sun is more sweltering than enjoyable, and even though the new peanut butter crunch ice cream appears tasty on advertisements, you're not hungry and you let it melt under the heat whilst your friends talk amongst themselves, brushing you out of the conversation.

Well, *Lucas and Dustin* are talking; both Mike and Will Byers look out of place, and their expressions are downcast.

The atmosphere is tenser than when you'd last expected, and it makes

it hard to breathe in. The more you notice the faults of the scenery, the more alienated the boys appear to be from their normality of talking and joking and poking fun at the other. Even Dustin and Lucas seem to have caught a whiff of the internal discomfort, and in time they disperse from the shop and hurry home faster than usual.

Will Byers leaves quickly afterwards, with a hunch in his steps and a grim atmosphere that creases his face like a living night terror. You leave as well, going to the Byers's home in a different direction and abandoning a very absent-looking Mike at the ice cream shop.

Nancy invites you over and combs your ear-length hair, playing tunes on the radio and letting you hum offbeat to the rhythm.

You've stopped going over to the Wheelers's after the basement fight, but everyone is out of the house and you needed a familiar sense of comfort; so when Nancy asked if she could give you a quick makeover in order to test out some new nail polishes and makeup, you didn't say no.

Her room is a private indulgence, however close to Mike's empty room it might be. But you snuggle into the sanctuary felt in the tranquility as much as able, shunning your ugly turmoil from thoughts.

Nancy is the first to speak into the quiet, disrupting an instrumental solo from her radio. She places a bow in your hair and murmurs airily, "So I've noticed that you and Mike aren't talking much. There a reason?"

You don't shake your head because you don't want to unravel the pins sticking to your hair, but you don't answer verbally either.

Nancy just hums and takes this for an answer. She clicks open a disc-shaped object containing pink, and runs a tickly brush containing the pretty tint on your cheeks, dusting them and making you choke back a sneeze.

"I wouldn't think too much about it," she finally says. "Boys are

assholes.”

Disregarding her foul humor, you have to manage a nod.

“Besides, Mike like *adores* you,” Nancy continues, snapping the disc shut and rummaging through other various items scattered on her bedspread. “It’s pretty annoying, actually. His eyes are all goo-goo when he sees you, *ugh!* If my boys looked at *me* like that all the time, we’d probably be married by now.”

You pretend to follow along, but you scrunch your brows anyway because you’re not really getting the objective of this conversation.

You’re instructed to close your eyes as Nancy rubs glittery-looking colors onto both lids. It’s a bothersome sensation, albeit tolerable.

“The point is, Mike is a pretty nice guy,” she eventually concludes, and she sounds sincere on the matter. “I wouldn’t be too worried; couples fight all the time, and you’re both...what, fourteen? Shit happens.”

You don’t nod because her brushes are poking your eye, but you think there’s truth in her words, even when she hastily tells you afterwards not to tell her brother she said any of that.

With painted facial features, you finally smile and nod.

Will Byers pops into your makeshift bedroom one afternoon and says that Lucas has called a meeting at his household. You silently note that it’s rather late to start up one of their weird Dungeons games, but you just agree to go, because Will Byers hasn’t talked to you for weeks and you believe Lucas wanted you to participate in whatever he’s planning.

Since neither of you ride bikes anywhere past sundown, Jonathan gladly chauffeurs you to the Sinclair residence, and when you arrive in the driveway you only see that Lucas’s bedroom lights are on; his parents must be out late again.

You walk out to breathe in the night as Will thanks his brother for

the ride. In a stiff quiet you both make your way up to the front door's entrance, seeming cognitive of the other's avoidance of the other that cuts through the peace brought forth by the crickets like a knife.

Will Byers knocks, and almost immediately the door whips itself open and you both jump at the sudden motion of Lucas practically dragging you into the warm house. Will Byers lets out a sharp protest when Lucas grabs the hood of his jacket, and you by your wrist more tightly than you attain to.

Stricken with a phantom horror at being dragged against your consent, you let Lucas plop you into his bedroom, illuminated by the sole lamp on his bedside. In the dim light encouraged by the evening, you see Mike Wheeler, sitting rigidly on the bed, poised like a mannequin doll.

Your first reaction is to turn away and attempt to leave the room, but Dustin surprises you by locking everyone inside, guarding the closed bedroom door with crossed arms.

Will Byers retreats into the farthest area possible, but he is ultimately snagged by Lucas's hand on his jacket again and a, "Oh, *no* you don't!"

He's seated on the bed as well, but you notice how Mike almost seems to scoot away from Will Byers before both Dustin and Lucas give him a Look that screams, '*Don't even think about it.*' So he sits and slouches instead.

You look over at the guard at the door. "Dustin—"

Dustin seems to catch on what you're about to ask, because he shakes his head rather ruefully. "It's for your own good, El."

You disagree, but before you can comment you snap your head around in a panic when Lucas slams a lightsaber to the wall, grabbing your attentions.

"*Okay, assholes!*" he crows, frowning pointedly at the boys on the bed, but you don't feel excluded. "I think we all know why we're

here.”

Will Byers is the first to admit, “I...not really.”

The tip of the lightsaber is once again banged onto Lucas’s poor wall, making you all jump.

“Newsflash, Byers! Yes you do.” Thankfully, he drops his weapon this time, only arming himself with a glare that makes all of you wither. “I wanna know why everyone in this room has been acting like a bunch of bitches to each other.”

None of you talk, making him angrier.

Mike switches his gaze over to Dustin, who’s still guarding the door, for assistance. “Dustin—”

“Sorry man,” his friend shrugs, looking less apologetic than when he’d said the same to you. “But Lucas is right. Both you and Will have been acting pretty ridiculous lately.”

Will Byers blinks. “Me?” he squeaks.

“Yeah, you. Don’t think we haven’t caught you eyeballing Mister Casanova over here.” To emphasize, Lucas prods Mike with his elbow, making the other boy shove his friend away distastefully.

You attempt to dissociate from the anxiety being twirled in the room by stepping back, but unfortunately this catches Lucas’s attention. He points, and you flinch. “Don’t think *you’re* getting off easy, El! You’ve been treating Will and Mike like shit and it’s about time you offer an explanation for yourself!”

Your mouth runs dry and you pluck at your fingernails, wishing to bite them if it weren’t for the pretty magenta nail polish on them; it’d be a shame to ruin them. Instead, you coil your lips into a tighter frown.

Lucas just sighs in exasperation. “Unbelievable,” he mutters. Then he calls, “Dustin! Help me out, dude.”

Behind you, said friend sighs theatrically. But he eventually responds:

“Sure thing.”

You make way for Dustin as he steps away from his position near the door, but when Will Byers attempts to hop off the bed and head for the unguarded doorway, Dustin easily blocks him and pushes him back.

“Relax, dude! Sheesh,” he snaps, then turns back to all of you with a cold stare that catches you off-guard, given that Dustin almost *never* looks at you like that. Even Will and Mike shudder at their friend’s surprise countenance.

“Alright, pussies!” he exclaims harshly, “Here’s what we’re getting into tonight! We’re gonna talk about our *fucking* feelings and we’re gonna *like* it! We will sit here all night if we have to, I want this to be meaningful and full of heart or you better be *damn* certain that we will lock you in here until the end of summer vacation! *Mike!*”

He points to Mike Wheeler, who cringes and picks at Lucas’s bed matting. “You’re gonna tell Will how you *really* feel and you better do it right or I give El my full permission to make your brain explode!”

You don’t know if you want to take it *that* far, but you have to agree with Dustin; you want answers and you want them *now*. So you participate in the glaring contest directed towards your boyfriend until he looks at Dustin, then at you, then at Dustin again before he mutters, “I don’t feel anything.”

Lucas knocks him on the back of the head with a loud slap, and Mike howls. “The hell, dude?!”

“Bullshit!” Lucas bristles. “Turn to Byers right now and admit you like him!”

“I *don’t*, though—!”

Lucas slaps his friend again, earning him a louder shout and a string of curses that follow. You almost cover your ears.

“*Stop* it, Lucas!” Will Byers interjects, luckily, because you’re not sure how much more you can withstand of Mike being beaten, but you manage to keep your mouth zipped in fear of being yelled at again.

“Lucas, I’m serious! I don’t care if he likes me or not!”

Dustin intervenes as well, leaving you excluding once again and you back away, wishing to meld into the wall and disappear. “Lucas, c’mon, just hear Mike out on this one,” he protests.

Mike wriggles out from underneath Lucas’s arms, which are now locking around his neck (you think you remember them calling it a “headlock”, which is fairly self-explanatory). In breathless pants, Mike eventually sinks onto the mattress with presumed defeat. His hair is matted and concealing his eyes.

“Okay, look, Will,” he eventually murmurs, and his voice is so small and drained of confidence that you have to lean in to hear what he’s saying properly. “I...I think you’re...”

“You don’t have to like me,” Will interrupts, looking red and shameful; you haven’t realized his basset-hound eyes are glistening. “I know I’m weird. You don’t have to pretend and feel *sorry* for me or anything.”

Mike immediately snaps upwards to face his friend. You can’t see his face, but he sounds surprised, maybe even *offended*, at Will’s accusation. “I don’t feel like that because I feel sorry for you.”

Dustin holds up a hand, pausing the heart-to-heart. “Wait, so you admit you like Will?”

There’s a silence, and then a very long, very drawn-out: “I don’t really know.”

Lucas sighs again, but he doesn’t sound as angry before; maybe a tad annoyed. “What about El?”

Me?

You forgot you were supposed to be involved; you’ve detached and you’re viewing the confrontation with a numbed heart, blockading the hurt you’re experiencing. Everything is like a show on the television, with you as the neutral audience, and you have accepted your role as the loose end, the unimportant string that must be cut off entirely.

"Look, I don't care if you like guys or anything like that," Lucas explains somberly, "Hell, we've known Will is a queer forever now! Even *before* he told us."

Will sputters. "Wait, what—?"

"I don't give a fuck about you thinking Byers is cute, man," Lucas continues, ignoring Will's outburst. "My problem is that you're treating your girlfriend like a piece of shit because of it."

Mike Wheeler appears to droop at the mention of you, and when he looks up at you, he looks genuinely sorry. Finally, he's giving you a meager show of regret for how he's been treating you, and it grates on your temper like sandpaper.

You swallow hard, remaining stiff as a statue.

"El," he tries, and then falls apart because it looks like he really doesn't know what to say, and the feeling is mutual.

Lucas takes this as his turn to prolong his counseling session. "It's not cool to disregard Eleven like that, man. Not cool. She can break your neck with her mind; I wouldn't upset a girl like that. She's a hard one to find."

"You can like dick, but you can't *be* a dick," Dustin agrees.

"But I *like* El!" Mike protests, and his eyes are shiny and helpless, just like Will Byers, who's still crumbling in the corner and has resorted to cuddling one of Lucas's pillow to his chest, his eyes heavy.

"And I—I don't *want* to break up with her," Mike continues, voice like crackling glass, and your heart pangs. "I just—I don't know what I feel. I like both, and I *can't* like both!"

As if on cue, both you and Will Byers perk up. You blink because the amount of desperation in Mike's voice is breathtaking; are you *really* worth that much to him? Is it *that* hard to drop you out of his life?

Meanwhile, Will Byers sniffles.

When everyone turns to the crying boy, snuggling a pillow to his

heart, Will's voice is chipped and small. "You...you like me?"

And then the attention switches back to a very red Mike Wheeler, who doesn't look at his friend as he shuffles in place and mutters, "I mean, yeah..."

His confession drops a heavy stone on your chest, but then he sputters in your direction: "But I like you, Eleven! I do! And, I-I know I can't have both, I *know* I can't, b-but..."

And then Lucas asks:

"Well, why not?"

His question tumbles the rocks off of your ribcage, like a surprising breath of fresh air, and you feel like it's opened a new window in your heart.

Why not?

Because Mike Wheeler is precious to you; because when you share, you end up clutching to things hard enough to choke them, because you're selfish...

The thoughts dissipate when both Will Byers and Mike Wheeler give the same sort of look you're feeling inwardly; your heart stirs.

Mike stutters, looking lost and ruffled: "Well, I—because it's weird?"

Will Byers, despite his shiny cheeks and reddened nose, nods. "Yeah, people can only have one boyfriend or girlfriend, that's a fact."

"Yeah, and boys are only supposed to like girls is a fact too, Byers," Dustin points out, but he doesn't sound taunting.

Even so, Will Byers's face becomes corded with humiliation, and he grumbles, "That's different."

"Different my ass," Lucas bursts in. "Mike, don't kid yourself. I mean, have you seen your sister lately?"

Mike looks at Lucas weirdly before he explains further, "Look, I'm no

expert, but she appears to have a crush on like, *both* that Steven prick and Will's brother."

Will Byers look up again with the same dinner-plate eyes as when he first touched Mike Wheeler's hand. "What?"

"You heard me. Nancy has tabs on both boys and no one even sweats about it."

"That's because—okay, *first* of all, that's probably not true," Mike intervenes, still seeming untidy about the inclusion of his sister in the debate. "And secondly, that's different because it's two guys going after the same girl. That shit happens all the time in movies and books."

"I wouldn't be too sure, Mike," Dustin adds in, sounding sly. "I think Steven and Jonathan have it out for each other too."

Will Byers chokes. "What?!"

"The *point is*," Lucas cuts off the direction of the conversation, transferring the subject and allowing a knot you didn't realize was forming in your stomach to loosen, "that I don't see any problem with you liking boys and girls at the same time, Mike. Hell, I think that's like some weird superpower! The more the merrier, right?"

"Lucas," Mike groans, burying his flushed face in his hands. You find a drop of amusement at the reaction despite your current state of much-desired solitude.

Even at the newfound revelation that Mike likes both of you equally, there's still something sullen and unfortunate that you feel roil in our gut like a punch. It makes your title of a girlfriend be worn more flexible than needed be, and you feel like you're slipping into something less enviable, maybe something discarded altogether.

You're not attracted to the idea of allocating your cherishment with Will Byers.

But maybe that's just selfish.

You haven't realized that all pairs of eyes have locked onto you,

waiting. You haven't said a word this entire conversation.

"Eleven," Will Byers murmurs, and despite how frail your name is in his mouth, however despondent he appears, physically—he seems steady; 'strong' would be another synonym for him in this moment. "I'm so sorry."

Well, *that's* unexpected.

Even the other boys ripple with confusion, and with a squeeze at Lucas's pillow Will snivels, "I don't *wanna* steal your boyfriend. I didn't mean to...make things worse. I didn't want to be in the middle of this."

You hadn't thought about the idea that Will Byers wasn't antagonizing himself on purpose.

You feel the walls you've barricaded away from the boy who lived crumble at your feet, leaving your eyes watery. "Will...—"

"I've ruined everything," he whimpers, and you find your feet with more brains than the rest of your body because without realizing you rush to the bedside and reach for Will Byers; the boy who experienced what you have, the boy who vomits into the toilet at three in the morning yet rubs circles into your back the next morning with enough compassion to share. The son of the family that willingly took you in even when you were stubborn.

And you threw this away because of a boy?

The next thing you know Will's breath is hitched and he cries into the pillow, and your arms are around him and you whisper his name because you don't know what else to do. And then weight presses into your back and Mike Wheeler is bringing you both as close to him as possible.

Bastions of anger melt away into one being, draping over you three like a soft blanket. The world is crying and apologizing because you're sorry, you were selfish, you weren't thinking, and Will and Mike are contributing because they had no idea, this wasn't fair to anybody, they're sorry too, they didn't mean it...

More arms cradle you, locking you in place and keeping you on earth, crying, hugging, and apologizing. Dustin's chubby torso articulates comfort, and you stay.

These are your boys. Your *family*.

You can make this work because it's important to you. Because despite all of the troubles as of late, you wouldn't trade this for the world.

Everyone unwraps eventually, the air is sleek with stray sniffs and wiping of tears. Will Byers laughs first, his eyes still streaming with tears down their sockets, and Mike follows soon after. They laugh as one note resonant, and it's a pleasant, cracked song on your heart because they're yours; Mike Wheeler still loves you, and Will Byers is not your enemy.

"Alright, alright, shut up," Lucas says with a smile, but he looks like he's been crying too. "Great hustle guys, we really got things worked out."

You brush a hand over your face to towel off some leftover liquids spewing from your nose and eyes, and at Lucas's mention of closure you stop. *Have we really?*

Will and Mike seem to be thinking the same things as you, because in the circle you've made between the three, you exchange intimate looks with the other that only raises more questions than answers.

"Soooo, what now?" Dustin asks, thankfully voicing everyone's thoughts.

Mike snakes a hand into yours, warm and velvet, and you take it in a second. There's still something there that's been tattered in the fight, but it feels like nothing more than a loosened stitch. It can easily be sewn back.

And then you look at Will Byers, his face glassy and showing more approval of your silent reconciliation than anybody else. He's selfless, he's kind, he's brave...

Of course Mike Wheeler would fall for him.

And you extend a hand, and Dustin lets out a jubilated whoop from behind when Will laces his fingers into your palm. Mike does the same, and Will Byers blushes more when all of your hands are linked together. And you smile at Will, for once in a really, really long time.

“There we go!” Dustin beams, and your neck feels hot because you know that there are witnesses to the reconciliations and you’re not sure you agree with it. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Mike just exhales again, a smile teasing his mouth. “Oh my god Dustin, will you shut up please?”

Lucas just snorts and gives Dustin a high-five, and in that crack of palms you feel the meeting is adjourned.

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You once heard a simple saying: ‘Easier said than done.’ You think it works here.

To have Will Byers actively practicing his new role in your mended relationship feels a bit slandered. Sometimes you forget that it’s okay for him to laugh that hard at Mike’s jokes or have him stare way too long, and sometimes you just forget to be *okay* with that.

But Mike’s shoulders seem looser when he realizes his can hold hands with two people now, and best of all he can have his cake and eat it too. You feel a bit ignored, naturally, when Will first starts tagging along, but Mike is more affectionate to you in public (for good reasons too), and when you all return home and Mike cuddles with the Byers boy a lot longer than platonically appropriate, you find balance within it. Especially since he seems to enjoy the cuddles more when you’re around, even if you’re just on the sidelines, observing.

Then the air unspools, and it comes from realizing that you’re not outdated; you’re *wanted*, and you’re held as an *equal*. Neither of Mike’s romances seem one-sided, and he seems and *feels* unconfined. It’s like shackles that have dug into his wrists for years are unlocked, and he’s free to kiss *both* of you.

And you didn't know until much later, when you were laughing alongside Will Byers at a joke no one told, that a friendship has also been healed.

You approach the circumstances with open arms, relishing in Mike's pecks on your crown and giggling when he does the same with Will Byers, because the boys get squirmy and tongue-tied after the kiss and you think it's funny. You all laugh easier around Dustin and Lucas now, who are pleased with their success on making you all content, and when you eat burgers as a group again Mike holds Will's hand under the table.

The garden you help them with has grown into constellations of various flowers, blooming and varied, yet a cobble of petals. It smells nicer when shared, and you and Will both discover the enjoyment of picking the ladybugs off the vegetation.

Sharing blankets comes easier. Laughing is unrestricted. The kisses melt into your skin and you savor the warmth that seeps into your bones, because you know that this is good for Will to experience too.

And with Mike...he's *happy*. He loves you both, and the prior air of competition you may have held for his affections thaws in time.

The 'girlfriend' entitlement wears down into something nicer, less burdensome. You don't feel like you have to understand it as much, because you feel evened by Will Byer's contributions of reason, and his love for the same boy as you. It's an easier weight if it's shared.

And for that, you think you're happy too.

"Aaaaaand the winner of this year's prom kings and queen are... William Byers, Michael Wheeler, and Eleven!"

A crackled tune plays over an old radio as Dustin and Lucas hoot and applause, presenting an exaggerated ovation at Lucas's announcement.

Will and Mike and even yourself have to giggle a little at the amount of effort sold into making Mike Wheeler's basement the substandard

equivalent of your school's prom; none of you had considered going because if Will Byers wasn't going to be accepted as Mike's soulmate like you were, you didn't wish to partake.

And here you all are, dressed prim and pristine and sitting on the couch in Mike's basement as you're brought up and Dustin places a paper crown on all of your heads whilst Lucas continues to cheer. Yours is pink, Mike's is blue, and Will's is yellow.

And Mike laughs when his faux crown is claimed (you think the color compliment his eyes). He says to Dustin, "Dude, aren't these the paper hats from your Christmas party last year?"

"Bite me, it's not like we had a lot of time to make actual crowns."

You all gleam under the artificial spotlight of the moment, and you and Will hold Mike's hand and kiss one side of his cheek like becoming the kings and queen of a basement for one night is an honor. He just shies away from your affections with a toothy laugh.

You glow because you're royalty, and the crowns may be a bit too big but they share an equal power; you feel mighty and strong with hands linked together, and you think your eyes are bubbling hotly but you manage not to cry.

"Thanks so much for doing this, guys," Will smiles, looking equally as touched. "It means a lot."

Lucas brushes him off with a cheeky grin, concealing affection. "Ah, it's nothing, man. I knew those homophobic teachers wouldn't let you in the dance anyway."

"And besides, who needs a prom?" Dustin adds. "We've got chips and an old radio, what more do you need?"

"And paper crowns," Mike inserts teasingly.

"Exactly! No harm no foul."

"Maybe next time we could invite that girl you guys keep ogling over," Will chuckles. "Max, was it?" The mockery in his tone earns him a slap from both Lucas and Dustin that tilts the crown on his

head.

"Maybe we will, smartass!" Lucas crows, grinning from ear to ear even with the harsh wording. "Who knows? Maybe Dustin and I will both date her at the same exact time like you losers do!"

"Considering that she actually *likes either* of you," Mike protests, and you have to smirk a little alongside your boyfriend; Max is a nice girl, and you wouldn't mind sharing the basement's prom night with her.

Then the song switches into something lively and upbeat, and the melody gets your toes tapping. You caress the blue orchid on your wrist that matches your pale pink dress, and you sway to the beat.

You haven't danced in a long time.

As if on cue, the other boys begin to dispatch and dance along (albeit poorly) with the song's pulsating tune. Dustin extends a friendly arm towards you, and you link it with a smile as he twists and turns and guides you along, making you laugh.

You manage a look over at Will and Mike, who are just as amused and are taking turns twirling the other around like maidens, attempting and failing to serenade and giggling all the while. Their faces are red and *alive*. Their shared spirits seep into your own bones and you find contentment in watching everybody dance.

This is *home* for you, and it doesn't have to be a physical place; it can be with more than one person, you decide. It can be warm and soothing when nothing else aligns, and maybe that's okay.

And you think you're crying a little when the beat transitions into another song and Dustin releases you to go and salsa dance with Lucas, exaggerating their trots and making you erupt into laughter without realizing.

Mike and Will both pull your arms and you jump but then settle into their hold as you all spin around, laughing, singing, becoming red with exhaustion and the moves aren't practiced. You trip over their heels many times and you almost lose your corsage and the paper crowns fall off your head but you're all too alive to care. You feel

your heart beat with one another and you forget where one starts and the other ends.

The dance itself was made for two.

But you make it work.

Author's Note:

'I think we deserve a [soft epilogue](#), my love. We are good people and we've suffered enough.'

[Title](#)